

Pacific ocean in a small boat (part one, the crossing)

You might wonder why someone would want to cross a vast ocean in a small boat, and that would be a good question.

Sometimes imagination just takes hold of you, and the how or why doesn't seem to matter. At least it has for me. Somewhere along the way I got the idea in my head that it would be possible to sail my own sailboat around the world. At the time, I had no idea how I could accomplish that or what a huge undertaking it would entail, but it was a dream. You have to start somewhere and dreams are as good a place as any.

When my first wife and I took off in early 1994 on this huge adventure, we had never spent a night on board while sailing. We had obviously spent the night on the boat, but sailing through the night is an entirely different experience. Some people aren't even aware that on long ocean crossings you are literally sailing 24/7. When you're only traveling at 6 mph, you have to keep moving because the less time at sea, the better. (Once I realized that 15 minutes by plane would cover as much distance as 24 l-o-n-g hours on my sailboat, I never complained about flying again).

During the day in the open ocean you'll scan the horizon for ships and anything up ahead that might be in your way, but at night you have to learn how to relax as you plow through the water, completely unaware of what might await you ahead.

I had read many books about boats hitting giant logs, or partially submerged shipping containers, and even tales of being rammed by defensive or horny whales. The stories usually ended when the people were rescued from a life raft after days or weeks at sea, and you had the nagging suspicion there were those who never got the chance to tell their tale.

Later in our travels we briefly met a family in Tonga who were about to set sail for New Zealand. Only the mother made it, after drifting ashore on a piece of floating debris. In the middle of the night they were run over by a giant freighter that never noticed the crunch of fiberglass under its thick steel hull. The small sailboat sunk quickly with the father and children trapped below, while the mother, who had fallen asleep while on watch in the cockpit, floated to the surface. As you can imagine, this horrible story was huge news in our tight-knit cruising community and made everyone even more alert and nervous while underway.

For our peace of mind, we chose a steel boat, 37 feet in length and made in Canada. Above the waterline it was sleek and curved and fooled just about everyone, as they assumed it was made of fiberglass. Notice I say "it". I never got

into the habit of anthropomorphizing boats into a "she" and giving it human qualities. I know it has a long seafaring tradition, but really...

I named our boat "Veja Du", which was based on a George Carlin joke where he said, "Some people have feelings of déjà vu. Not me man, I get Veja Du, the feeling that I've never been there and never done that!". The name turned out to be a mistake, because I was always having to spell it and most people didn't get the joke, even after I explained it.

Those first years of the 1990s were good times for my commercial photography business. I was very busy, had three full-time employees and was bringing in (and spending!) a half million dollars a year, which was a lot back then. When I told my accountant of my plans to leave all this behind and sail around the world, he was flabbergasted that I would've worked that hard to get where I was and then just take off for the unknown. Admittedly, it was fairly audacious, and I'm sure many of my friends thought it would never happen. Failure never crossed my mind. Although I had chartered a full-size sailboat a couple of times previously, I had never owned anything larger than a 16 foot Hobie Cat catamaran, which by comparison, is just a toy. My only experience sailing in any water remotely close to an open ocean was when I had foolishly crossed the Gulf Stream from the Bahamas to Florida by myself in a tiny catamaran in 1978. The point I'm trying to make is that I was not exactly what you would call a seasoned sailor, and that meant I had a lot to learn.

I knew I didn't want to embark on this journey by myself, so task number one was to find a woman willing to join me. That wasn't as easy as I thought. It also ended my trip all too soon because I didn't choose wisely, but that's another story. I heard many times from couples living on small boats that cruising will either bring you closer together in your relationship, or reveal that you should have never been together in the first place. I now know that's true.

What they say about hindsight is true, but at the time, Linda seemed willing and capable, and in my headstrong blindness, that's all that seemed to matter in the moment.

Since there was no Internet back then for research and learning, I read books and magazine articles, went to cruising seminars and took classes in first aid, diesel maintenance, and sail repair. Linda learned Morse code so that she could get her Ham radio license, which would be necessary to make phone calls to her parents every week. She also developed an extensive medical kit, which included serious pain medication, antibiotics, and even a scalpel with sutures. I used to joke that we had the capability of doing open-heart surgery, but really just ended up needing more Band-Aids.

Living around salt water in the tropics requires medical vigilance, as even the slightest cut can easily become infected. We knew one guy who had to be airlifted off his boat, and almost lost his leg, after getting a puncture wound from a fishhook that he didn't treat properly. The worst problem I ever had was getting "monkey butt", a funny name for painful skin eruptions you can get by sitting around too long in damp, salty clothing. You've been warned. It's interesting how the things you get concerned about the most, like pirates and storms, never materialize, but the things you should worry about don't show up on your radar screen until it's too late.

Everything is more difficult and takes longer when living on a small boat: washing, cooking, navigating, communicating, etc. You also have to get used to the fact that you have very limited water and electricity, two things that we tend to take for granted with life on land.

I installed a water maker on our boat, which in its most basic description, filters the salt out of seawater. It's an amazing device and a real lifesaver. The water maker and most everything else, including our refrigeration, lights, fans, and electronics, all ran off 12 volts that came from a massive and heavy battery bank. Those batteries could be recharged with the alternator on our four-cylinder diesel engine, or from the solar panels outside. I also had a little generator contraption that sat at the stern of the boat and was connected to a long and very stiff rope with a propeller attached to the end. While we were sailing, the propeller would spin and turn the generator, which provided charging for the batteries as long as we were moving.

If you wait for everything to be perfect, you'll never leave the dock. So after months and months of learning, preparation, and buying supplies and spares for every conceivable possibility, we finally said goodbye to our friends and left our comfortable land life behind. To make all this work financially, I had long-term renters in my house that were paying \$3500 a month, which was more than we could ever use in the South Pacific (there was one month in Fiji where we never spent a dime). The sailboat itself cost about \$120,000, which was about what I sold it for several years later.

From Los Angeles, we hopped down the coast of Baja, Mexico and eventually to the mainland where we, and several other boats, staged in Puerto Vallarta for the lengthy passage to the South Pacific that was ahead of us. French Polynesia in general, and their islands of the Marquesas specifically, are almost 3000 miles from the coast of Mexico and it would end up taking twenty days and nights to get there.

We were part of about a dozen boats making the crossing from Mexico and we would check in with one another at a specific time every day to give the coordinates of our location. I'm not sure what good it would've done had one of us failed to check in, but it did seem to make everyone feel better to at least hear a familiar voice, even if we never saw them.

Although we carried a sextant and I vaguely knew how to use it, we were fortunate to be cruising in one of the first years that GPS devices were widely used by sailors. The older guys thought we were crazy to rely on electronics, but the system turned out to be reliable and accurate.

Current boats have a chart plotter that shows your exact location on a digital map, but in 1995 our handheld GPS unit just gave me the latitude and longitude, which I then had to plot on a paper chart. As an example, this is my current location in Mount Dora: 28.8025° N, 81.6445° W.

You may remember from history class that even after the sextant was invented and perfected, it only worked if you knew the exact time. There was a worldwide competition and cash prize for the person who could invent a clock that would work accurately at sea. The importance of accurate time eventually dawned on me when I realized that the earth is moving very quickly under the gaze of the sun. It seems as if it's just sitting up there in the sky, but if you were to see its path seared along the earth, it's actually moving at around 1000 mph. At the equator, this translates to about a half a mile every second, so that's why an accurate chronometer is so essential to navigation.

It has been said many times that open ocean cruising on a small boat is 99% boredom and 1% sheer terror. The boredom part is exactly what you're hoping for, and we were lucky to have steady tradewinds pushing us southwest for days on end.

In my only experience with open water sailing, in the gulf stream off Florida, the swells were large, widely spaced and predictable, and that's what I expected in the Pacific. What I got instead was wind-blown waves going our basic direction, but other swells that seemed to hit us from all different angles. It could be accurately described as feeling as if you were inside a washing machine. Although I never got technically seasick, it was nearly always uncomfortable and I didn't like it. Passagemaking also upset my regular patterns of sleep, which I didn't appreciate either. We started out keeping watches of four hours each, all through the night, but after days of never seeing anything, we eventually got into the bad habit at night of putting on the strobe light at the top of the mast, setting an alarm on the radar that would warn us of any approaching ship or storm, and then falling soundly asleep.

The one thing we did see that really surprised me was the presence of birds almost every day. I never realized there are birds who actually live in the open ocean, requiring days of travel between them and the nearest land. We also had flying fish that would end up getting stranded on our deck at night, their crispy, salt-encrusted bodies needing to be peeled off the next morning. We did have some overcast days

of higher winds, and waves that seemed to tower over our tiny ship, but for the most part, we were fortunate with weather.

I had heard about "the doldrums" but didn't really know what to expect. There's an area near the equator where the prevailing winds in the northern hemisphere meet those of the southern hemisphere, get confused, and don't seem to know what to do. It was there that the wind stopped. It's very strange to experience steady breezes, day and night, for almost two weeks, and then have absolutely none. You could tell that we were in an area of weird weather because we would just sit there bobbing like a cork in calm, glassy water and be surrounded by thunderstorms all around us in the distance. Every once in a while one of those clouds, dark and heavy with moisture, would approach and dump its contents.

It's not something you normally think of, but when a great amount of water falls from the sky, the air underneath it has to go somewhere, and that creates a whole lot of wind for a short period of time. You had to be prepared for the gust, which would come out of nowhere and send you scooting along, only to disappear again. Those bursts of rain would also be good opportunities to wash off the boat and get a free shower at the same time.

One day during a quiet period, a small whale cruised by amazingly close to check us out. The exhaled air from his blowhole smelled like low tide. On another one of those hot and dead calm days I jumped off the boat and into the water, which was over two miles deep. It was a strange feeling to watch our little sailboat from that vantage point, out in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately, there were no unforeseen gusts of wind that could've whisked the boat away without me.

After a few days of motor-sailing in the often windless doldrums, the breezes filled in again and we started getting closer to land. The anticipation of a landfall after many days at sea is intense, and when you finally see that piece of earth emerge on the horizon, getting larger by the minute, it's very exciting.

(next, French Polynesia)

https://youtu.be/tLeW_KsC17Y









